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ABSTRACT

Extension education evaluators are concerned about accounting for lack of control over and the value of describing environmental influences when assessing impact. Evaluability assessment (EA) identifies relationships between and describes external influences on program events. It provides information regarding clarity about goals and objectives and program plausibility and measurability. EA prevents evaluators from measuring something that does not exist or is of no interest. Since 1984, over 30 EAs have been conducted in Cooperative Extension Service (CES) programs nationwide. An analysis of six EAs shows their major purpose was the planning of a plausible, evaluable program; the staff-centered working group was critical to EA success; the modeling process got a good response from working groups; gathering and analyzing information from stakeholders was vital; the plausible question lost some significance because staff made immediate change; the usual concerns about data validity applied; and the evaluator had a role in program design. Some observations are that: (1) EA emphasizes means, not ends; (2) EA implementers confuse perceptions of "reality"; (3) high-level administrators should be actively involved; (4) nonprogram staff stakeholders should be carefully selected and interviewed; and (5) an important outcome was the change in team member attitudes, knowledge, and skills about evaluation and programming. (YLB)

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Using Evaluability Assessment to Improve Programs in the Cooperative Extension System

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The Cooperative Extension System

The Cooperative Extension System (CES) is a nationwide network of education professionals working with and through people to improve the quality of their lives. Created in 1914 by the Smith-Lever Act to take knowledge directly to the people of rural America, it now includes urban families as well. The success of this system in developing the world's most productive agriculture is due in large measure to its unique connection with research and teaching in the land grant college system, and a synergistic federal-state-local partnership of funding and programming.

Practical education to help people in their daily lives and to make quality decisions affecting their communities and society at large is the main function of the CES. This is accomplished by land grant college subject matter specialists and county staffs in agriculture, natural resources, home economics, human nutrition, rural and community development, and 4-H and youth. They are joined by thousands of volunteer leaders who assist with program implementation, and by local advisory boards/committees which help identify problems and set priorities.

Programs are mostly planned at the county level by Extension faculty and advisory committees and are then implemented by county staff with the assistance of state specialists and volunteers.

People participate in programs on a voluntary basis. If the programs do not satisfy their expectations, they may decide to drop out.

Extension's methods provide technical assistance and advice through the dissemination of information, materials, and individual and group problem-solving.

Extension education programs are nonformal in nature and do not have a captive audience, unlike school/college instruction. These programs are conducted in homes, farms, community centers and other locations for heterogeneous audiences on a wide variety of problems/subjects. Evaluation of extension education programs, therefore, raises unique methodological questions. In fact, the 1977 Congressional Farm Bill seriously questioned the economic and social impact of extension programs and mandated that a system of accountability and evaluation be developed which would enable evaluators assess impact with greater scientific rigor. A basic concern of evaluators in trying to account for impact is the lack of control over and/or the value of describing environmental influences such that the connection between program events and outcomes is difficult to prove. It is in this context that the Evaluability Assessment technique which helps identify relationships between program events and describes external influences on these events could be valuable to extension evaluators.

Evaluability Assessment

Background. Evaluability assessment (EA) began in the early 1970s by Joseph Wholey and his associates at the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C. (Wholey, 1979). The process itself and one of its key components - stakeholder involvement in evaluations

- have been emphasized, but not much attention was paid to implementation, including technique and replicability (Smith, 1989).

Rog (1985) studied evaluability assessments (EAs) conducted in or sponsored by different government agencies from 1972 to 1984. She concluded that the process was confined to the Departments of Health and Human Services, and Education, because of the interest of Wholey and his associates. Smith (1989) assessed the progress of EA in her account of the Cooperative Extension System's experiences with EA, and suggested that one of the reasons for it not spreading to other agencies was the " . . . scarcity of a concrete defined methodology . . . clearly defined outcomes . . . and clearly defined and plausible activities (methods, steps, tasks) for reaching those outcomes" (p 2).

Definition. Evaluability assessment is a formal study of a program which provides information as to whether or not there is clarity about the goals and objectives, and whether the program is plausible and measurable. This kind of information can be used to support decisions about "improving" a program. For example, if goals and objectives of a program are not clear, then responsible persons may want to institute procedures to clarify them. Or, if the program activities do not seem likely to lead to accomplishment of the goals and objectives, then there is reason to change the methods. Finally, if the expected results are not observable and measurable, program managers may want to consider changing the goals and objectives.

On the other hand, affirmative responses to these questions of (a) well-defined and measurable program objectives, (b) a discernible logic for reaching them, and (c) a set of sequenced activities that are plausible representations of the logic could tell the evaluator that an impact study of the program is justified. Thus evaluability assessment is an invaluable prestep to an impact study. Smith (1989) aptly describes this:

> When the purpose of the EA is as a prestep to further evaluation, these outcomes permit a clear indication of whether an intensive evaluation is warranted, and if so, what components/activities in the program can provide the most desirable data. In essence, they prevent evaluators from committing two types of error (Scanlon et al., 1979): measuring something that does not exist, and measuring something that is of no interest to management and policymakers (p 15).

Benefits of EA. Clarifying the logic (theory) of a program and thus avoiding the first type of error has several benefits. Program staff increase their programming skills, and efficiency and effectiveness thus improving the chances of program success. There is immediate implementation of program improvement actions, and the probability of successful replication of a program is increased. Policymakers have a better picture of the program and can make more intelligent choices.

The major benefit of identifying stakeholders - those who have an interest in the program and/or are affected by it - and determining their awareness and interest is the publicity and credibility gained for the agency conducting the program. People take interest in a program when they are asked their opinions about it. They may feel more

important as a result of being interviewed and may see the program as more important. This helps avoid the second type of error.

EA implementation steps. The EA process is essentially the same as for any other evaluation effort - data are gathered, comparisons are made, and conclusions are drawn. The number of steps used to accomplish this process has varied. Wholey (1979) described EA as an eight-step process, and Jung and Schubert (1983) and Rog (1985) identified six steps. Smith (1989) used ten tasks to review the EAs conducted in CES.

1. Determine Purpose, Secure Commitment, and Identify Work Group Members
2. Define Boundaries of the Program to be Studied
3. Identify and Analyze Program Documents
4. Develop/Clarify Program Theory
5. Identify and Interview Stakeholders
6. Describe Stakeholder Perceptions of Program
7. Identify Stakeholder Needs, Concerns, and Differences in Perceptions
8. Determine Plausibility of the Program Model
9. Draw Conclusions and Make Recommendations
10. Plan Specific Steps for Utilization of EA Data

Evaluability Assessment in the Cooperative Extension System

Mayeske initiated the EA concept in the Cooperative Extension System in 1984 based on his experiences with Wholey. Mayeske and Smith did several EAs early in collaboration with states. This work was expanded, and to date, over 30 evaluability assessments on 17 different program topics have been conducted or are in progress in cooperative extension services in the states and/or territories (see Table 1). These EAs were conducted with the intention of (a) improving a later impact study, (b) improving an existing program, and/or (c) planning a plausible, evaluable program.

Smith (1989) made an in-depth analysis of six EAs from the perspective of the purposes and process of EA. Evaluation staff of state cooperative extension services and the Extension Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture have provided further insight based on their experiences. The first author of this paper has been involved with two EAs in Louisiana - Water Quality, which has been completed, and Leadership, which is in progress.

Purpose served. The major purpose served by CES EAs was the planning of a plausible, evaluable program. None of the programs studied had in place a well-defined logic of sequential events, with specified functional components (activities and resources) and indicators to be able to determine when planned activities were implemented and outcomes achieved. Therefore, the working groups took an in-depth look at the different programs and developed program logic models. These models served as guideposts for the program staff who were involved in the working groups as well as staff who had to

Table 1

Evaluability Assessments Conducted/in Progress in the Cooperative Extension System

Topic	State(s)/Territory
Teleconferencing for Locally Elected Public Officials	Illinois
Master Gardener	California
4-H Youth	Maryland, Mississippi, Pennsylvania Connecticut
4-H Middle Management	Hawaii
Aquaculture	Texas
Home-based Business	Alabama, Oklahoma
Family Wellbeing	Delaware
Import Substitution	Guam
Economic Development	Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Washington
Water Quality	Louisiana, Maryland, Virginia, Connecticut
Rural Revitalization	Extension Service/USDA
Leadership Development	Louisiana, Maine
Child Care	Maine
Training Programs for the Elderly	Maine
Local Production and Consumption of High Nutrient Density Products	Northern Marianas
Growing Your Own Food	Micronesia
System for Planning and Reporting	Kansas, Illinois

decide policy, manage or implement the several programs. Thus there was a common understanding of program scope and methods.

Also, in this process, ideas for program improvement surfaced and the involved staff could choose to take action on their own or communicate with other program staff and administrators.

Only in a few cases was the decision taken to follow up the EA with an impact study.

The EA working group. The EA working group is critical to the success of an EA. The group is composed of individuals involved in the program who come together in a series of meetings and go through the EA process. Essentially, the group identifies stakeholders, localizes the interview questions, defines the initial version of the program model, analyzes stakeholder interviews, draws conclusions and makes recommendations, makes plans for utilization of the results, and decides how best to disseminate findings to constituencies to further the utilization process.

Mayeske (1989) commends the way in which the CES adapted the concept of the EA working group to its needs and resources. Because of limited funds, it was impossible to put a team of observers in program sites to see how the program was being carried out. Nor was this felt to be a sound approach considering that many extension agents spend only a part of their time on any one program, and if so, it is highly seasonal. Therefore, the practical solution was to pull together at a central location, a number of local staffs who carry out the program and impact directly on their clientele. Under such conditions, the evaluator becomes the facilitator of the group and is not a threat to group members. Differences of opinion and viewpoint among them are not seen as being provoked by the evaluator.

Mayeske (1989) contends that this CES staff-centered approach by which the evaluator is facilitating the group through a series of disciplined steps in a specific framework generates (a) consensus about the program and the process, and (b) commitment to carry out the program. Sharing of experiences helps improve the program and provides new insights. Professionals feel a part of the process, except in cases where individuals do not want to give up their autonomy and are threatened by being accountable to the group. By and large, however, the process has worked well for the CES. Professionals who are normally working in dispersed locations doing their own thing, as it were, feel a part of the program just by coming together, sharing ideas, negotiating and compromising. This process improves overall program impacts.

Smith (1989) cites a number of internal factors which affect success. It is important for members to "buy in" to the process, and to reflect a broad range of levels and types of the program, without making the group too large. Ideally, 7-9 members is considered an optimum size for an intensive, interactive, task-focused group. Members should trust others in the group. This can be accomplished through work and social settings. The team leader needs to act democratically, supporting team members and encouraging their participation in all aspects of decision-making, but still maintaining

authority to ensure that decisions are made and tasks are completed. An important external factor is administrative support and peer recognition. Administrative support may take the form of additional resources, release time, encouragement, and administrator participation on the team.

The number of people in the CES EA working groups varied. All levels of the program were included - county staff, state staff and administrators. Smith (1989) observed that where administrative participation was more intense, administrative decisions were more quickly taken, and ideas for changes more quickly incorporated into ongoing programs. In the Louisiana Water Quality EA where administrators were not a part of the working group, administrative support was strong because of regular communication and feedback during the EA process, and a post-EA briefing, wherein the entire working group met with key administrators and secured informal administrative commitment to the recommendations.

Another key person in the CES EA working groups was a state-level member with evaluation expertise. The task of this person varied, from team leader to co-chair to active participant. Whatever the role, it is this person who saw to it that the EA got conducted in an appropriate manner.

Modelling. The program logic models developed in the CES EAs represented the staff's perception of the program, i.e., a description of the important steps to bring about the desired changes in causal linkages. This follows Rossini's definition of a model as a simplified representation of part of the "real world" that contains its most important relationships so that its essential workings may be studied (Rossini et. al., 1981). It is therefore less concerned with generalizability and theory development. If these outcomes do occur, they are considered as added benefits.

Smith (1989) suggests that the format used to construct the model should be one that the working group feels comfortable with and which helps them understand what the program is about. The basic format used in the CES EAs contained two parts: (1) a sequence of the program logic with a supporting flow of (2) activities/functions, resources, and indicators of successful performance.

In the first part, key assumptions are listed in a time or causal sequence to form a hypothesis trail. Key components are enclosed in boxes connected with arrows which represent the movement of program implementors and/or clients toward program goals. The logic for CES' overall expectations are diagrammed by Smith (1989) as a series of If-Then statements (Figure 1). The logic model of the Louisiana water quality program is shown in Figure 2.

The second part of the logic model contains a description of each program event in terms of purpose and what is required for accomplishment. This includes a listing of all the activities and resources that make a program happen - educational, legitimizing and promotional activities; staff, hardware, information technology, supplies and other needed resources. Performance indicators are things which show that activities have been done and objectives/goals achieved. Smith (1989) points out that program staff are

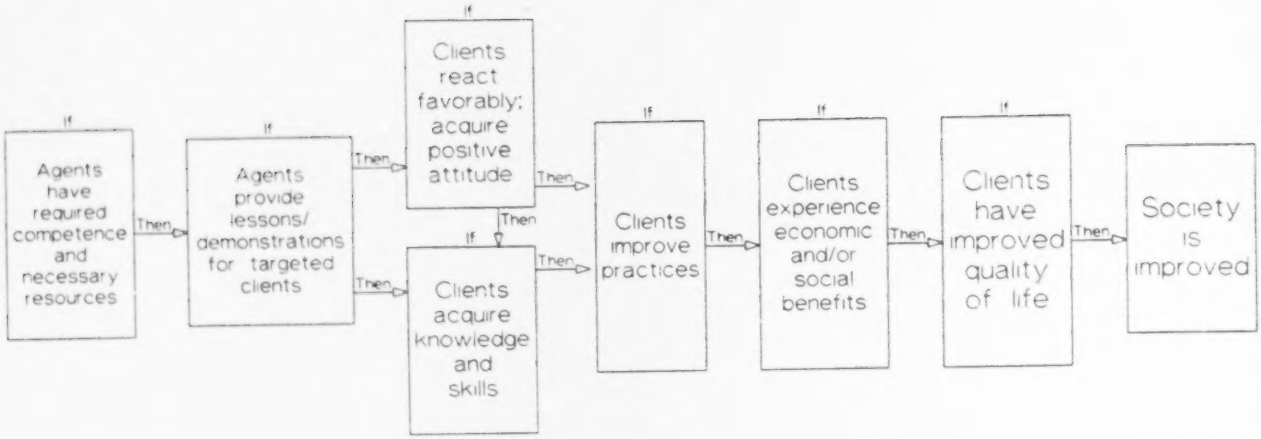

Figure 1. Overall logic model for extension programming

Source: Smith, Midge F. (1989). Evaluability Assessment: A Practical Approach. Boston: Kluwer Academic Associates (p. 56).

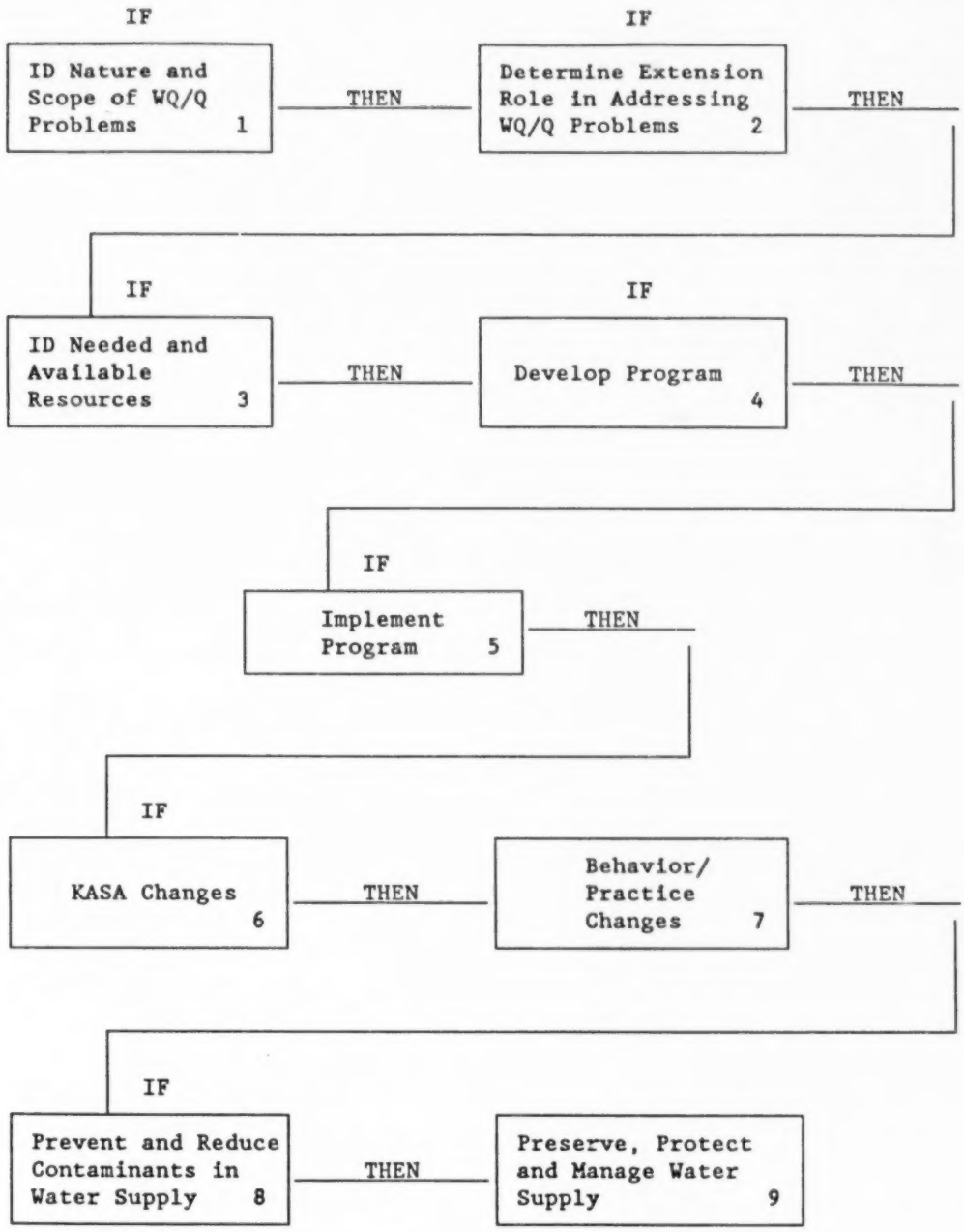

Figure 2. Logic model for Louisiana Water Quality program

neither adept at nor enthusiastic about specifying measurable indicators for objectives, let alone activities, and may tend to leave this task to the evaluator. From the experience of the CES EAs, she suggests that this be a team effort, with the evaluator questioning and probing program staff to focus on "what" indicators rather than on how they will be measured. Table 2 shows the activities and indicators for one of the program events in the Louisiana water quality logic model.

Table 2. Functional Components of a Main Event in the Louisiana Water Quality Logic Model

ID Nature and Scope of WQ/Q Problems 1	
Activities	**Indicators**
1. Convene state and local advisory groups	Minutes of meetings
2. Survey stakeholders	Survey results
3. Gather descriptive data	Documentation on file
4. Compile and prioritize	Report on
5. Identify problems and prepare situation statement	File

Overall, the modelling process always seemed to get a good response from the CES EA working groups, for two reasons. One, the visual element of being able to see as the group discusses events in the model is efficacious, impressive and facilitates the process. Members can sit back, listen and see, brainstorm and participate. Second, the visual progression through the program is a disciplined way of focusing and sustaining attention while giving a good feeling that something concrete is being accomplished.

Gathering and analyzing information from stakeholders. Stakeholders are recognized as important to the educational program and process. In fact, they are an integral part, and should be considered as such. They represent views outside the CES framework of what the program has been, is, or should be.

Generally, stakeholders do not reside in or give experiences in a narrow confine. They have a broad base of experience and interaction. Therefore, they are a vital component in terms of relevance of educational programs and generating support for CES.

Identifying and interviewing stakeholders is a critical aspect of the EA process which influences not only its direction but the use of its results. Usually, an EA begins when one or more intended users asks about a program - elected officials, administrators, program managers or staff, citizen groups. Besides these primary clients of an evaluation, there are usually other people who will be interested in and can be expected to have differing views about the program and future evaluations.

Smith (1989) summarized various approaches and considerations in the literature regarding the identification of stakeholders. She suggests an initial listing of potential stakeholders based on factors such as flow of money and/or information through the system, intensity of influence or stake in the organization/program, and resources for the EA. The important thing is to use more than one approach since "different stakeholders do not generally share the same definition of an organization's 'problems' and hence, they do not in general share the same 'solutions'" (Mitroff, 1983, p. 5). The second step is to prioritize the list by considering (1) what harm or benefit the potential stakeholder can exert on the organization/program, and the evaluation, and (2) the knowledge/interest each has about/in the program and/or the evaluation.

In the CES Texas aquaculture EA, 106 stakeholders were initially listed. This list was reduced to 32 by prioritizing on two criteria - how much the team thought an individual stakeholder knew and cared about the program, and how much influence they were perceived to have over the program. In the Louisiana water quality EA, where stakeholder categories/organizations were identified rather than individuals, the initial list of 52 was retained.

Interview questions asked of stakeholders should determine the stakeholders' awareness of and interest in a program, i.e. their perceptions of what a program is meant to accomplish, their concerns/worries about a program's progress toward total attainment, their perceptions of adequacy of program resources, and their interest in and need for evaluative information (Smith, 1989, p. 88). Open-ended questions should be used, rather than fixed choice, unless the latter are supplemented by probes. Stakeholders should know about what is being asked. Therefore, different questions may be necessary. For example, questions about familiarity with CES may be redundant for university administrators. Questions should be carefully reviewed for overall intent and should be simple, clear and direct. It is good to pretest with respondents from the same stakeholder populations. Table 3 gives the set of questions used in the Louisiana water quality EA.

Personal interviews, either face-to-face or by telephone, are the most appropriate ways to gather information from stakeholders. Usually, there must be some system of recording the information for later transcription. A tape recorder is invaluable for this purpose. Selecting the right interviewers is important. Tradeoffs have to be considered in number of interviewers, interviewer bias and style, training of interviewers, and time available to conduct the interviews.

Once the information is gathered and transcribed in a suitable form, it is analyzed by the working group and the final result is usually a general statement of observations

and common themes, i.e., the big picture of stakeholder perceptions. Indepth, content analysis of the interviews by each question can also be done if deemed necessary. For example, in the Louisiana water quality EA, stakeholders responses to each question were first analyzed in seven categories. Then, observations and themes common to a majority of the categories were recorded (see Table 4).

Table 3. Stakeholder Interview Questions in the Louisiana Water Quality Evaluability Assessment

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1. In your capacity as ___*___, or, in your association with ___*___, in what ways is
(title) (organization)
___**___ involved in water quality/quantity concerns?
(organization)

2. Are there water quality/quantity problems that you feel ___**___ should deal with?
(organization)

3. What do you see as the most important concerns/issues affecting water quality/quantity over the next year? Over the next 5 to 10 years?

4. What additional information does ___**___ need to know to deal with your water
(organization)
quality/quantity concerns?

5. What do you feel the general public needs to know about water quality/quantity?

6. What do you feel the elected officials or regulatory agencies need to know about water quality/quantity?

7. Who do you feel should be addressing the water quality/quantity problem?

8. Are you familiar with the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service county agent or home economist or 4-H agent?

8.1 If yes,
(a) In what ways?
(b) Do you think LCES should play a role in addressing water quality/quantity concerns/problems?
(c) How?

9. Do you have additional concerns/suggestions about water quality/quantity?

* Use title/position of the person in the organization/agency.
** Use name of the organization/agency.

Table 4. Observations and Themes Emerging from the Louisiana Water Quality Stakeholder Interviews

- Need for coordination and cooperation among agencies.
- Need for education regarding public awareness and knowledge.
- Most stakeholders are committed to resolving issue but there are different perspectives on the nature of the problem.
- There are currently positive actions being taken.
- Agriculture is heavily involved in water quality issue.
- There is consensus that there are contaminants to be cleaned and a level of non-contamination to be protected, but there is a lack of agreement on what the levels are.
- Both quality and quantity are concerns.
- Recognition that many agencies need to be involved.
- Recognition that LCES should play a key role in education, information dissemination and facilitating with other organizations.
- Continue research into sources and types of pollution.
- Need for baseline data.

Determining plausibility of program model. Plausibility means there is evidence that the program activities will achieve the results expected, and there is no evidence to the contrary.

According to Smith (1989) four basic questions should be answered in this regard: Are overall program goals well defined? Are the different parts of the program well defined? Are the activities sufficient in type and amount? Are resources adequate to implement the activities? She contends that EA can answer the first two questions better than the latter two, and all four when there are omissions and lacks. She feels, in the final analysis, it is a judgement on the part of program staff. Information from stakeholders can also provide evidence.

Smith (1989) determined that in the CES EAs the plausibility question lost some significance because as the staff saw weaknesses in program logic as the program was being described, they made changes right then and there. This is because most CES EAs were program planning exercises rather than impact evaluations. It was logical to make plausibility estimates and adjust during the planning process.

Drawing conclusions and making recommendations. The usual concerns about the validity of evaluation data, and specifically qualitative data, apply to evaluability assessments, when it comes to drawing conclusions and making recommendations. Nevertheless, it would be futile not to follow through. In fact, program staff and administrators expect that evaluators will help decision making by bring forthright in their views.

Smith (1989) suggests several guidelines: (1) involving the EA working group and other potential users where feasible, (2) presenting conclusions along with the best reasons as to why a situation was read the way it was, (3) keeping out personal biases and values, (4) not going beyond the collected evidence, and (5) considering the organization's ability/willingness to make changes.

Table 5 lists the recommendations/next steps proposed by the Louisiana water quality EA working group.

Role of the evaluator in the EA process. The traditional role of an evaluator has been to respond to a post-hoc evaluation question posed by a stakeholder. Somebody is interested in seeing how a program did, and asks the evaluator to help. In this capacity, the evaluator provides his/her expertise in designing an after-the-fact assessment of so-called, often unlikely or non-validated, program impact. Rarely, do evaluators get involved at the front end of program design. Obviously, EA provides this opportunity. Therefore, the role of an evaluator is transforming from that of an archeologist to an architect. Rather than digging into the past, trying to uncover events and phenomena and establish some semblance of connection between them, the evaluator is seen as one who is intimately involved up front in designing the specific details of a program in the ideal situation, while, at second best, he/she has the opportunity to intervene during the conduct of a program and recommend adjustments.

Table 5. Recommendations/Next Steps of the
Louisiana Water Quality Evaluability Assessment

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1. Provide feedback to interviewees (stakeholders)

2. LCES should develop an "identifiable" water quality program along the lines indicated in this report and consider as next steps:

   a. Brief LCES Water Quality Working Group regarding the evaluability assessment results

   b. LCES Water Quality Working Group should:

      i. prioritize audiences and objectives

      ii. prepare proposal for resources

   c. Obtain resources from LCES administration

   d. Form task groups to do developmental work on prioritized objectives

   e. Complete steps 1-4 in time to incorporate into new POW cycle (FY 92-95)

   f. Initiate a quarterly newsletter regarding water quality efforts in LA

   g. Continue in-house communication regarding LCES activities in water quality

Smith (1989) holds that because of this close involvement with program staff and the program, evaluators may lose (the appearance of) objectivity in an EA. She feels that while it is appropriate for evaluators to take a position on program evaluability, plausibility, and recommendations for improvement, problems can occur when a subsequent evaluation of the program is conducted by the same person who conducted the EA. The problem can be a loss of credibility of evaluation results among those who are in positions to make decisions about the program. She recommends under such conditions that the program be evaluated by another individual or group, and/or ensure that the evaluation design and implementation are above reproach.

Observations About the EA Process

Smith (1989) gives an excellent set of observations about the EA process. These are summarized below.

1. While EA is based on an underlying assumption of rationality, the world is not so rational. Therefore, none of the CES programs and most of the earlier EAs cited in the literature were unable to meet the criteria for evaluability. Once the "unevaluable" conclusion was reached it became a matter of choosing among evaluation improvement, program improvement, and program planning.

2. The EA process emphasizes means rather than ends. Because of this limitation, somewhere along the way evaluation of ends has to be planned. This is particularly important for CES programs which are developed at grassroots to meet specific needs. At least EA assists in decisions about summative evaluations.

3. There are many perceptions of "reality" and program implementors and EA implementors often confuse them. It is obvious that the perceptions of those who are involved on the EA working group will influence the program logic model. Second, there is bound to be a discrepancy between what is being done (real) in a program versus what ought to be done (ideal). The working group needs to be aware of this discrepancy between reality and rhetoric - what they are doing and any needed changes. Otherwise, the program goals may not be achieved; stakeholder expectations may be erroneously increased; and the program personnel could wind up in a more precarious position in terms of program continuance than before the EA began - because the ideal model is not the reality. It is important to impress this difference on the working group and establish a procedure to separate the two and make adjustments.

4. High-level administrators should be actively involved.

5. Careful attention should be paid to the selection and interviewing of non-program-staff stakeholders. Points to remember here are not interviewing inappropriate persons, asking the appropriate questions, contacting only those who know about the program/those who can influence its future, focusing on substantive items, and completing all the EA steps.

6. One of the most important outcomes of the CES EAs was the change in team member attitudes, knowledges, and skills about evaluation and programming. Demonstrations of this change were in strong commitment to the program and the organization, and a heightened awareness of their abilities and potential for programming. It is interesting how both program and evaluation staffs grew by this involvement.

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